Community Design

Physical Layout

The physical layout of streets and lots reflects the period in which most of the area was developed. Following WWII, suburban development patterns were gaining acceptance, while vestiges of traditional urban patterns remained. Traditional patterns called for compact lots and narrow streets arranged in a connected grid, while suburban patterns had larger lots that fronted on wide, curving streets. However, the now-common practice of ending a street in a cul-de-sac was not frequently used. Despite its varied development styles, the area has a connected system of streets that provide for even distribution of traffic along many streets. Residential lots generally range in size from 5,000–10,000 square feet.

Street patterns have characteristics of both traditional and suburban neighborhoods. Streets are interconnected and blocks tend to be large.

Belmont

Connected streets with small blocks

Williamson Road

Connected streets with larger blocks

Deyerle

Disconnected streets with very large blocks

Land Use Patterns

The neighborhoods have a diverse land use mix. Though perceived as predominantly commercial, residential uses occupy nearly half the land. The northern and southern edges are dominated by intense commercial uses, but between Liberty Road and Hershberger Road, commercial development is limited to the Williamson Road corridor. Outside this corridor, residential uses are the dominant land use. Industrial uses are concentrated along Plantation Road and Kimball Avenue.

There are few vacant parcels. Though 16% of the land area is classified as vacant, much of it is actually used for parking in conjunction with commercial and industrial land uses. Most other vacant parcels are individual lots scattered around the neighborhood.

Existing Land Use

How land is USED

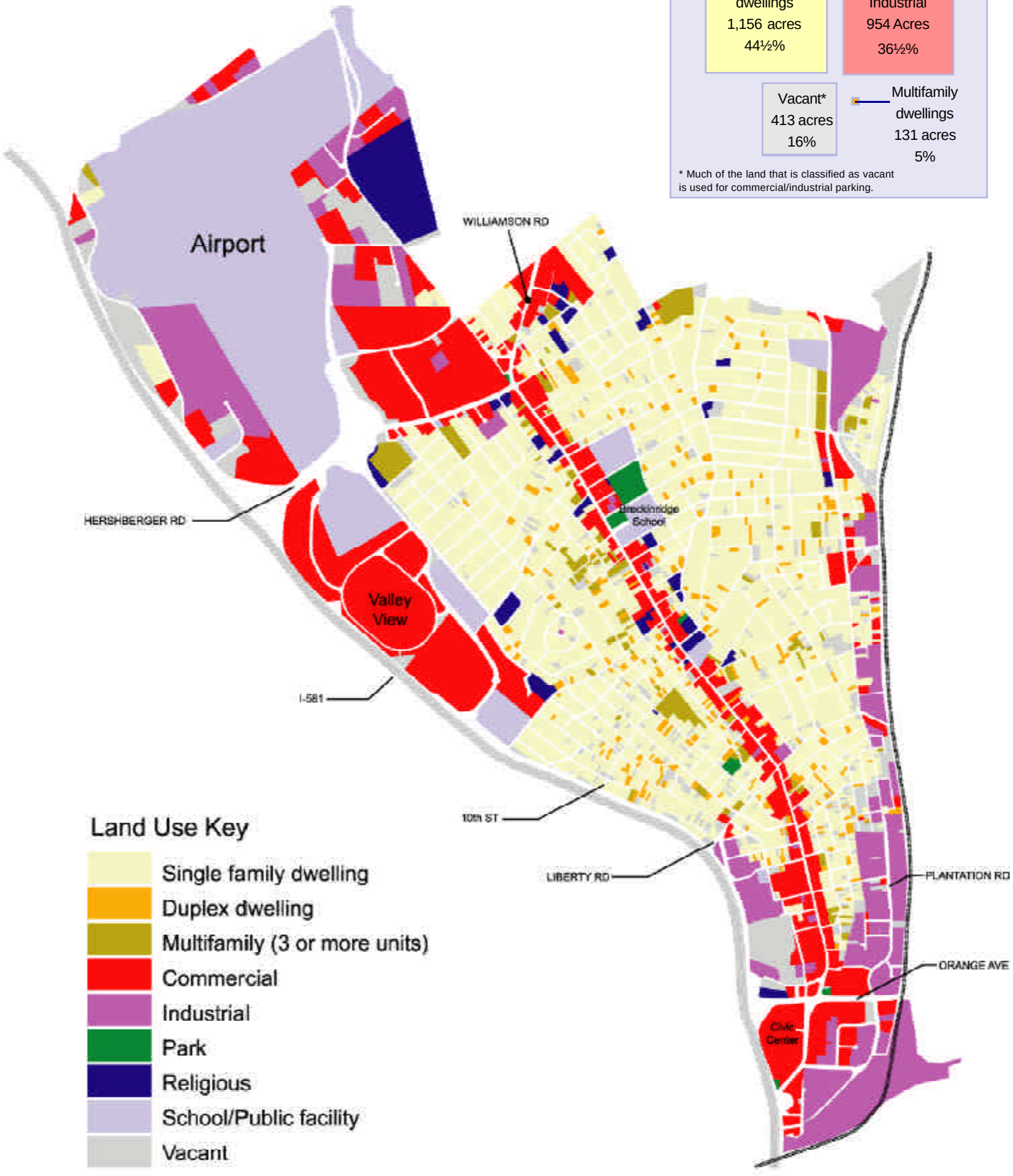
Single-family dwellings
1,156 acres
44½%

Commercial & Industrial
954 Acres
36½%

Vacant*
413 acres
16%

Multifamily dwellings
131 acres
5%

* Much of the land that is classified as vacant is used for commercial/industrial parking.



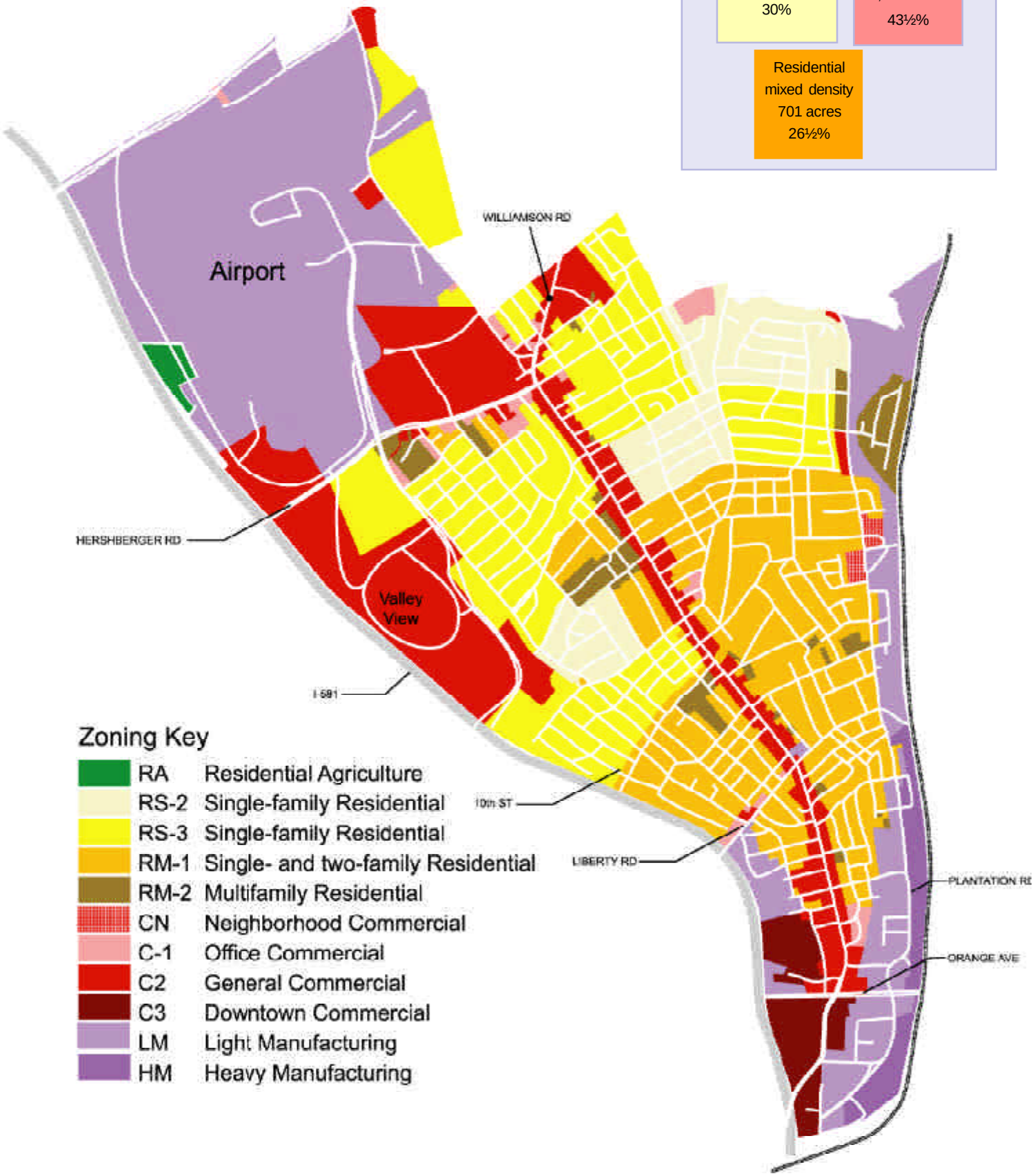
Existing Zoning

How land is ZONED

Single-family dwellings
803 acres
30%

Commercial & Industrial
1,151 Acres
43½%

Residential mixed density
701 acres
26½%



Community Design Issues

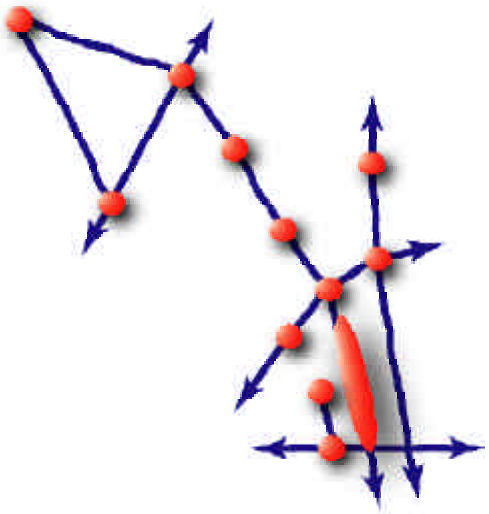
Through the planning process, planning staff identified major issues relating to the overall design of the community.

- Need for identifiable and unique places
- Commercial land use policies
- Relationship between residential and commercial uses
- Design of major streets

These are interrelated issues that need to be addressed in a comprehensive approach. The commercial corridor is not an inherently bad development form. Rather, it is the character of the development that usually takes place along it. While many communities attack the problem by geographically limiting strips, Roanoke's approach should be to improve the character of the development and "punctuate" the strip with a series of identifiable and unique places. Several such places along Williamson Road should be targeted for development as models for future development patterns. While this plan identifies node areas along Williamson Road, locations and priorities may be adjusted based on consensus of the business community, neighborhood interests, and the City of Roanoke.

Strategic Initiatives

A key symptom of strip commercial patterns is that there are few identifiable and unique places. To address this issue, this plan identifies eleven **Strategic Initiatives** where master plans should be developed with the intent of creating (or building on) identifiable nodes. Plans should be developed through a charrette process to produce consensus on a vision for each of the areas. Conceptual drawings should be developed to illustrate desired development patterns, building types, and street designs. Each Strategic Initiative listed below is discussed in more depth in the **Recommendations** chapter.



- Airport
- Civic Center/Stadium
- Auto sales & service cluster
- Oakland School
- Breckinridge School
- Crossroads Mall
- Valley View/Towne Square
- Plantation and Liberty
- Liberty Road & Williamson Road
- Whiteside Village Centers
- Liberty Road at Courtland Road

Adapting Commercial Land Use Policies

Regional land use and zoning policies of the 1950s and 60s solidified commercial development patterns along Williamson Road. The *1964 Development Plan for Roanoke* designated the entire corridor for commercial uses. Later changes in the nature of commercial development would work to compromise the viability of older commercial areas.

Between 1970 and 2000, hundreds of acres of new commercial development were created. Valley View Mall, Towne Square, Tanglewood, Route 419, and incremental additions throughout the region all represented major shifts in commercial development patterns. Activity moved to suburban areas near new population centers and the scale of development also increased. As these new commercial areas were created, demand for commercial property diminished in older areas like Williamson Road.

Regional zoning policies did not respond to these changes. Continuous expansion of the region's commercial development is not sustainable because a given population can only support a finite amount of activity. With slow population growth, new commercial areas not only supported new commercial development, but also drew business activity away from older commercial areas such as Williamson Road.

Two factors indicate that a saturation point has been reached: low floor-area ratios and low property values. *Floor area ratio* is a measurement of how intensely a property is developed. It is calculated as the ratio of building area to land area. The C-2 zoning district allows for a floor area ratio of 5-to-1 (five square feet of building can be built for each square foot of land). However, the average floor area ratio for properties along Williamson Road is 0.21-to-1, which is only **4%** of the allowable ratio. This low ratio indicates low demand for existing commercial land. Conversely, high demand for commercial property results in high floor area ratios because developers must maximize the use of the land.

Depressed property values are another symptom of a saturated market for commercial property. Property assessments show that commercial land values are very low along the corridor - averaging around $4 per square foot. By comparison, land values in downtown average $16 per square foot. Low land values along Williamson Road have resulted in chronic vacancies because values do not justify investment or spur owners to ensure that buildings produce income. Development tends toward very low-value buildings that are even below typical residential per-square-foot costs. Low land values result in business sites being dominated by asphalt instead of buildings because there is little financial incentive to maximize use of the site.

Some of the corridor's issues relate to zoning patterns that have not responded to sharp increases in the region's supply of commercial property. During the planning workshops, several participants felt the city should expand commercial zoning deeper off of the Williamson Road corridor so businesses could expand to the rear of their existing properties. This approach seems to be a logical way to support business development in the area. However, such action would likely aggravate the problem of a saturated market for commercial property.

This problem is not unique to Roanoke. The Urban Land Institute, recognized as an authority on real estate and land development issues, recommends *reductions* in commercial zoning to encourage revitalization of commercial corridors.

The economic health and sustainability of Roanoke's business environment depends on wise use of its scarce land resources. Improvements in long-term commercial land values will result from limiting, rather than continuously expanding, the supply of general commercial properties. Restricting the supply of commercial zoning will have the long-term effect of improving the quality of commercial development because it will encourage developers to invest more in a given amount of land.

In the Williamson Road area (as well as citywide), Roanoke must seek opportunities to create transitions to a mixture of less intensive commercial types and residential uses. The following types of land uses should be reviewed for possible transition:

- Small-scale retail, service, and office uses
- Existing residential uses
- Vacant properties

The **Future Land Use Plan** (see **Recommendations** chapter) identifies areas for transition to small- and medium-scale commercial activity. In addition, the plan strongly recommends against further piecemeal expansion of general commercial districts. Existing business types and other land uses were considered in developing the **Future Land Use Plan**.

While the amount of commercial land would not be significantly increased, public policies can provide for growth by increasing the development potential of existing commercial properties. One recommendation is to relax or eliminate some setback requirements and abandon setback ordinances, thus allowing many businesses to expand to the front of existing buildings. Another recommendation is to reduce or, in some cases, eliminate parking requirements. The vast majority of businesses provide more parking than is required. With less land devoted to setbacks and parking, most businesses will gain ample room to expand on existing commercial property. Reduced parking requirements would also open up the opportunity to establish common parking lots that serve multiple businesses.

Residential/Commercial Compatibility

Conflicts between residential and commercial uses have been a long-standing problem along most commercial corridors. Business and residential uses can peacefully coexist beside one another. Many conflicts can be addressed by conscientious business practices, thoughtful site design, and retention of existing transitional land uses such as small scale businesses, offices, open space, and higher density residential uses. There are several general strategies available for improving relationships between business and residential uses:

- Locate new buildings toward the front of the site, so that objectionable activity is physically moved away from residences.
- Ensure that noise and lighting stays on the commercial site.
- Make buildings attractive from all visible sides.
- Buffering and screening—physical separation with green space, fencing, and vegetation—should be used to complement good site and building design.

This plan advocates creating good relationships between diverse uses rather than strictly separating them from one another.

Street Design

Portions of major arterial streets like Williamson Road and Hershberger Road are hazardous for pedestrians and should be priorities for new sidewalks.

Another problem common to commercial corridor development is the quality of the street itself. Strip development typically occurs along a busy arterial street that is designed solely to move vehicles efficiently. There were numerous comments in citizen workshops related to making the community more attractive and walkable. Improving the appearance and function of major streets is a fundamental step in cultivating a better image of commercial areas as well as the neighborhoods that border them.

This plan advocates comprehensive improvements to key arterial streets to improve the overall definition of the street, define access points, improve overall appearance, and make walking and biking comfortable means of transportation. Both the business community and residents expressed a strong desire for a continuous sidewalk system along Williamson Road to encourage pedestrian access. However, the means for accommodating bicycles was less definitive. Members of WRABA expressed concern about safety, given traffic volumes and the potential for bike lanes to induce bicycle traffic by less-accomplished riders along the corridor. Bikes currently have the right to use the street and Williamson Road might be a preferred route for a commuter cyclist, while a parallel route would likely be preferred by the recreational cyclist. Moreover, alternative street design features other than bike lanes can work to accommodate able riders.

Ultimately, these considerations should be factored into planning of street improvements, which should involve residents and the business community. The **Transportation Recommendations** provide general guidance for streetscape improvements. Each street segment will need detailed study as to what actual improvements are implemented.

It is important to note that city-sponsored improvements to a right-of-way will not necessarily make for a good street. The design and layout of privately-owned properties and buildings are also crucial elements of an improved streetscape.

Parking Strategies

Parking emerged as an issue in discussions of the draft of this plan—particularly as it relates to site development with buildings close to the front and parking to the side and rear. Parking is a crucial issue because Williamson Road, like most commercial corridors, lacks on-street parking. Parking is typically provided on each individual site and is often provided in the front. The cumulative effect of this arrangement is that the streetscape becomes dominated by asphalt rather than buildings. In order to ensure ample spaces for customers, businesses often oversize parking areas. Such parking areas are often underused and consume limited land resources to a largely unproductive use. Strategies are needed to adequately meet parking needs while contributing to a better urban form.

Street side parking on Williamson Road at Burton Avenue

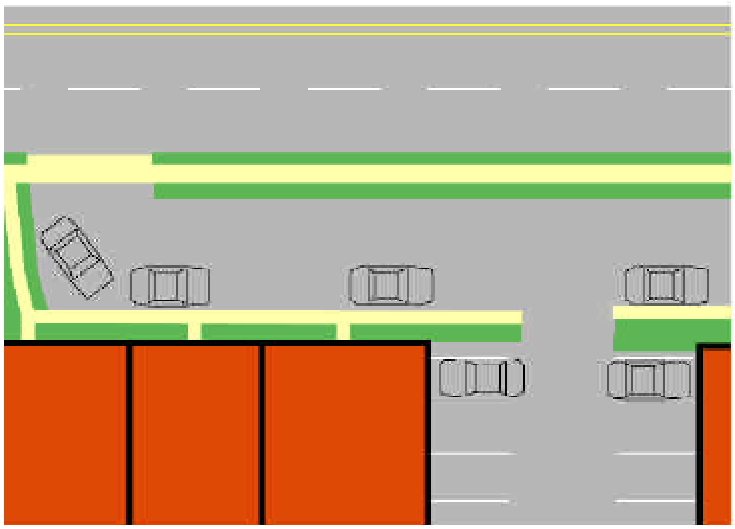
First, regulatory constraints must be removed. One barrier is the minimum off-street parking currently required by zoning. Applying the CN (Neighborhood Commercial), which has no parking requirement, is one way to provide flexibility. Providing allowances for available on-street parking is another way to provide flexibility.

Second, street-side parking should be encouraged as a preferred arrangement. Most blocks of Williamson Road have potential for creating new parking areas with direct access to the street. Such parking areas have parallel or angled parking which has the appearance of on-street parking, but would not involve conversion of travel lanes to parking. A good example of this strategy, as implemented, can be found at the former Virginia Hair Academy.

Finally, two types of shared parking lots should be created. **Public-access parking lots** should be created to provide customer parking for multiple businesses. Shared **long-term parking lots** should be developed as a means to move employee parking off-site to open up more convenient on-site spots for customers. Both public-access and long-term employee parking would make more lot area of a commercial site available for a business expansion. Furthermore, varying peak parking demands would reduce the total number of spaces needed, thereby allowing land resources to be used more efficiently.

Such new parking arrangements can be identified in several ways. A project should be initiated to do a block-by-block inventory of opportunities for street-side and shared parking. In addition, arrangements should be explored while planning the Strategic Initiatives.

This example shows a parallel "street" along which parallel or angled parking is created. A shared parking pocket is created between the buildings.



This example shows new street-access parking. A wide sidewalk and parking area become part of the right-of-way and are maintained as part of the street.